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ABSTRACT

This booklet attempts to answer commonly asked questions of parents of children with developmental disabilities about how to get children active in community recreational activities. The questions focus on accessing recreational activities and settings that include children both with and without disabilities. The booklet notes requirements of federal and state legislation that programs and settings be open and accessible to persons with disabilities. Parents are encouraged not to limit their children to adaptive or special recreation programs. Examples are given of combining segregated programs with more inclusive leisure experiences. Parents are also urged to use the child's chronological (not mental) age as a guideline in selecting appropriate activities. Parental communication with program staff is stressed. Reasonable expectations of staff and transportation arrangements are also discussed. Contacting other service professionals, agencies, and advocacy organizations is also recommended. (DB)

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COMMUNITY RECREATION

AND

CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

FUN FUTURES

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Children love to play. Children learn, grow and develop, all through their play. Play helps them to get along with children and adults at school and in their neighborhoods. Children learn who they are, helping them to understand their place within diverse and dynamic communities.

Many parents worry that their kids with developmental disabilities won't get to be around other kids in after-school programs, such as sports, plays, clubs and the like. Parents of kids with disabilities want the same things for their children as other parents want.

This booklet attempts to answer commonly asked questions generated by parents of children with developmental disabilities, about how to get kids active in community recreational experiences. Responses to questions will focus on how to access activities and settings which include both children with and without disabilities. The assumption is, no matter what the label, or how severe the disability, kids are kids, and all children need opportunities to play, be with friends, and have FUN!

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In recent years, many efforts have been made to improve accessibility of community recreation services. Federal, state, and local laws assure that leisure-related services provided to the public-at-large must also be made available to persons with disabilities. Current human service perspectives support inclusion of persons with developmental disabilities into all aspects of life. Schools are increasingly becoming integrated. Parents are realizing that their children, who are included in regular school settings, must have opportunities to meet and play with classmates during non-school hours. As a result, there is an increasing demand for community recreational programming to include persons with developmental disabilities. Through such initiatives, it has been shown, time and again, that accessible recreation settings and programs are not only feasible, but can be mutually beneficial to participants, both with and without disabilities.

With an increase in options, people have more choices.

Activity and social skills are learned in ways typical of kids their own age.

Positive relationships with others are started and nurtured leading to development of friendships.

Persons without disabilities become more accepting of differences and begin to appreciate the capacities of persons with disabilities.

People develop better self-concept and self-esteem.

By taking risks, people learn from failures, as well as successes, thereby enhancing personal growth and development.

People can be seen as "typical", not "special."

Persons without disabilities can serve as role models or co-participants, not as helpers or personal aides.

Physical fitness, health and wellness can be improved.

Leisure skills development can enhance job performance and community adjustment, leading to independence, productivity and full inclusion.

Parks and recreation agencies, YMCAs, scouts, community education, 4-H, schools and community centers are the typical agencies that offer a range of leisure opportunities to the public-at-large. These agencies usually offer their recreational programs at times convenient to the general public, i.e. after school or work, on weekends, and during vacation times. Call and they will give you information on their programs. Be sure to get on their mailing list.

No! Even though most were designed for children who don't have disabilities, all programs and settings must be open and accessible to persons who have disabilities according to various state and federal laws and legal guidelines. For example, PL 94-142 regulates access to school sponsored recreation activities (clubs, intramural sports, extracurricular activities). Other laws, including the newly enacted Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), assures access to other community recreation environments. The concern really is that most school and leisure agency staff lack the training and skills to effectively include children with developmental disabilities in more than just a select few programs. This is changing as staff are beginning to get the necessary training, as well as receiving technical assistance to make their services more accessible.

Even though you are referred to adaptive or special recreation programs, you are under no obligation to enroll your child in these. Many schools and community recreation agencies offer programs designed specifically for persons with disability. It is believed that by gathering specialized resources (staff, adapted equipment) at a few leisure sites or by limiting programming to agency "down times," the leisure needs of persons with disabilities can best be met. This, of course, presumes that persons with similar disability labels (mental retardation, autism) . 'I have the same types of leisure needs and interests, including the need for specialized staff and equipment. These practices also send out a confusing message that may only further isolate your child and foster dependence.

Beware! The choices you and your child have become severely limited when special recreators identify, for you, a "selection" of options that may or may not fit your child's needs, learning styles, lifestyles, or interests.

Not necessarily. If carefully planned and facilitated, even children with the most severe disabilities can be successfully included in programs and settings with children who do not have disabilities. It is understandable that for initial peace of mind you may wish to enroll your child in a program labelled "adaptive," because you may feel that the staff have the necessary sensitivity and programming skills to involve your child. However, don't underestimate the skills of the "regular" staff. Most have years of experience working with diverse, challenging children who do not have disabilities. While these professionals may not be running actual programs for people with severe disabilities, they may have a good sense of how to facilitate your child's positive and successful involvement in activities. They are experts at "kid dynamics" and usually have an unfaltering commitment to quality services for ALL kids. Get to know your local

recreation staff personally so that you may have a more complete understanding of how they can best meet your child's leisure needs.

Another option you might consider is to combine enrollment in adaptive programs with participation in typical recreational opportunities. This would allow practice of skills, plus enhance integration and relationship building with nonhandicapped persons. In fact, if done properly, some segregated programs might serve as effective stepping-stones to more inclusive leisure experiences.

Receiving 1:1 instruction from a dance therapist and using the skills learned at school dances.

Join the after-school adaptive bowling program and signing up for the employee league bowling tournament.

Attending adaptive leisure education classes through community education and applying skills learned to sign up for a woodworking class the next session.

Competing in Special Olympics swim meets and joining a local YMCA in order to practice and cross-train.

If your child is currently enrolled in adaptive recreation programs, take time to evaluate this involvement and start to make any needed changes.

Does this program teach my child skills that can be applied in "real life" situations?

Is my child learning skills that make him less dependent on parents and others?

Does this program serve as a "stepping-stone" to opportunities that will help the child to grow, develop and enhance his integration and inclusion?

Is what he's doing here enhance his acceptance, value, and appreciation among his peers?

Does my child really like being at this activity? Is he really having a "good time?"

It is important that you spend time talking with the recreation staff to acquaint them with the interests, needs, and capabilities of your child. Many myths and stereotypes about persons with disabilities are perpetuated because people lack awareness, understanding and appreciation of persons with disabilities. It is the responsibility of the provider agency to inform instructors of policies of nondiscrimination and accessibility. Advocates and parents can provide needed awareness orientation to instructional staff. Other participants in the program can be educated, as well. If teasing or mocking behaviors do occur, instructors will know how to redirect relationships in a more positive way. Teasing is natural for socialization to occur among children. It is a way of testing limits, personal feelings and understanding of others. While it is normal, it is never easy for the parent or child. But, the recreation staff is trained to help make certain that relationships between participants is not a cause for concern. Share your feelings with staff and maintain an open line of communication.

Absolutely! However, it takes a receptive, flexible and motivated instructor, along with other creative, imaginative people to arrive at modifications and adaptations that enhance the recreational experience particular to your child. All children are unique and require a specific approach that recognizes this uniqueness and individuality. Your child differs only in the extent and level of support needed. However, be certain that adaptations are made based upon the actual needs of the child, not based upon arbitrary criteria such as the disability label the child bears. Adaptations should be designed to support the child's participation in the activity and to enhance success and enjoyment. Adaptations can be as simple as rearranging furniture to accommodate a wheelchair or changing the rules of the game, to having persons available to provide more intensive one to one assistance. You and the staff are only

limited by your imagination and willingness to search for solutions. Think of others who can make suggestions, then invite them to join you in coming up with creative solutions.

Asking your child directly is a good place to start. If his leisure experiences have been limited to only a few activities or take place mostly at home, or he is unable to communicate specific preferences to you, you will need to make a "best guess" in his behalf. Simply view what other kids his age are doing for fun. Make a list of facilities and programs available in your neighborhoods and surrounding community. Take your child to visit lots of different leisure settings and gauge his response and interest. If choosing for the child, try to relate your choice to a known interest of the child. For example, if your child enjoys rhythm instruments (maracas, tambourine) look for programs that introduce participants to folk music. If your child is more alert when outdoors, the local nature center is an excellent place to go.

Use the child's chronological (actual) age, not mental age as a guideline. Age appropriate activity involvement aids positive perceptions of the child and enhances acceptance and inclusion.

Talk to the child's teachers, friends, classmates, siblings, cousins and others close to the child for information on leisure interests.

"Tune-in" to the child's expressions to find out interests.

Let your child make choices, as s/he is able, allowing them to act independently and to learn the consequences of the decision.

Try new things; take risks. You may not think the activity would be fun but your child will!

Oftentimes, you can get the information you need off the registration form in the recreation program guide the leisure agency publishes. Call or stop at the agency to get a copy. Sometimes, though, the information you need isn't as complete as you would like. Be sure to find out at least the following:

Times, dates - do they fit your schedule?

Any costs to you? (fees, equipment, supplies)

Age limits for participants. Are kids my child's age registering?

Complete program description. What are the expectations of participants?

Any special equipment/apparel/materials needed?

Number of staff to number of participants.

Experience of staff.

Provision of transportation (if required).

Availability of financial assistance (if needed).

Gathering this information helps you decide if the activity is "worth doing" and assists you with decision-making and planning concerning your child's involvement.

If you are interested in enrolling your child in the program, you must now decide if it's important to discuss with staff the unique characteristics of your child. In some instances, the presence or absence of a disability is irrelevant to whether or not the child can successfully participate in the program. At these times, you can decide not to share this information. It's up to you. However, in some cases, it seems quite helpful to share these characteristics with staff to be certain that appropriate considerations be made to accommodate your child. This can enhance their participation in and enjoyment of the activity. In fact, this might be an effective way to "set the stage" for positive and ongoing communication between you and staff, leading to other inclusive leisure experiences.

Share the attitudes you have regarding your child. For example: treating your child as they would others his/her own age; expecting him/her to be as independent as possible; encouraging others to interact with your child; supporting and assisting only when necessary; encouraging accomplishments; and so on.

Provide specific information such as: your child's strengths and limits; types of assistance that will be necessary for your child; specific activities that are appropriate; how your child communicates; pertinent medical information; and any other unique characteristics that may effect your child's participation.

Finally, share specific teaching techniques and ways of adapting activities. You may want to recruit the help of your child's teacher, therapeutic recreation specialist/consultant or other related services staff to help you discuss this information and best ways to incorporate it within the recreation activity.

Leisure agencies assume that parents or other family members will transport their children to and from recreational activities. This is a usual practice for families until such time as children are able to get to activities themselves. You will need to assume this responsibility, as well. However, if circumstances prevent you from providing transportation, several approaches can be taken:

Contact the school or leisure agency to find out what kinds of transportation they provide for school-aged participants.

Contact public transportation organizations to determine availability of buses and taxis which cater to the needs of persons with disabilities;

Check with public assistance agencies to determine availability of and eligibility for financial assistance to support public transportation of children with disabilities;

Talk with neighbors, friends and

co-participants of the activity to arrange carpools;

Check with community organizations such as Lions Clubs and similar fraternal and charitable organizations. They may be able to provide funds to purchase accessible vans and buses;

Discuss with teachers the possibility of teaching your child how to use public transportation.

Most programs set up to serve the general public usually have some financial support available to reduce memberships, activity fees, and similar costs. YMCAs, community education, parks and recreation are examples of agencies that provide full or partial scholarships (dependent on the funds they have available for this). Don't be afraid to ask! You may need to have an interview and disclose your financial situation (privately and confidentially) before you are awarded a scholarship.

Look for low or no-cost recreational alternatives. Often these are listed in: newspapers, community bulletin boards, public service announcements, and Chamber of Commerce/Office of Tourism handouts;

Call your local ARC. They may have a listing of options;

Agree to volunteer or assist in other ways in exchange for reduced fees;

Approach fraternal organizations and similar groups as sponsors to fund people to go on trips and outings. (Be willing to do a presentation to the members of the sponsoring group);

Assist in writing grant proposals to get funds to support systems changes that will increase access to leisure opportunities.

Oftentimes, it is immediately assumed that if a person has a disability, another adult is necessary. In order to be certain of what your child really needs, take a close look at the activity to see what is expected of all participants. Compare your child's abilities to these. If there are certain aspects of the activity that your child cannot perform independently or with appropriate assistance from the instructor, then decide the actual supports needed. You may find that an additional person is not needed.

In the event that another person is needed, don't expect instructors to take time away from working with others to spend extra time with your child. In this case, it is best to work together to identify this person so that your child can participate. As the parent, you will need to take primary responsibility to identify this person. You should look to people in your neighborhood (child care providers, neighbors, classmates) who know the child. Recreation and advocacy agencies sometimes have volunteers from whom to draw. There are also volunteer agencies who can refer persons to you or the program. Students from local universities can also be recruited. However, instructors and co-participants are capable of providing some supports such as giving helpful reminders, helping someone with their jacket, and assisting persons during some parts of the activity. Regardless of the level of support, your child should have every opportunity to learn so to become more independent in this and other recreational activities.

Periodically, check on how things are going and assist with making changes, if necessary. Evaluate things such as: is your child participating and if it needs to be increased; are the adaptations working; is your child having fun (smiles, laughing, interacting with others); is there enough supervision (not too much or too little); is your child learning and becoming more independent in the activity. It is critical that you communicate with the leisure staff throughout the activity.

More and more leisure agencies are learning ways to include children and youth with developmental disabilities in programs and settings alongside kids without disabilities. These and a number of social service agencies are hiring personnel who have the skills necessary to include all kids in recreation.

1. Contact the staff directing programs at the site where your child wishes to play. Assume your child will get the support and assistance they need from these persons. Offer to assist, as needed, to make it work.
2. Contact the special needs coordinator, adaptive recreation director, or similarly titled person within these leisure service agencies. They will have ideas about programs and approaches that will assist your child's participation.
3. Contact your local advocacy organization (Arc, UCP, Autism Society) to see if they have staff who can help facilitate inclusive opportunities.
4. Contact classroom teachers, special education coordinators, and other school personnel for their suggestions about resources. Many school districts have interagency transition committees who are addressing leisure and recreation issues.
5. Join (or start!) an advisory group to discuss strategies for inclusive school and community recreation. Share your vision and perspectives to assure equal recreational opportunities for your child and others.

SCOLA Leisure Activity Fun Guide
Arc Ramsey County, St. Paul, MN 1991
This guide highlights the activities of SCOLA, a grant-funded program that addresses the leisure needs of youth with developmental disabilities ages 14-21 years. Activities in support of inclusive school and community recreation include: parent empowerment training, self-advocacy training, technical assistance and training of leisure service providers, coalition building, and demonstration efforts. For a FREE copy, call: 1-612-778-1414.

Community Recreation and Persons With Disabilities: Strategies For Integration, S.J. Schleien and M.T. Ray, Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Inc. 1988. ($25.95)
This book details a process to include persons with disabilities into a wide range of community leisure services. It's audience includes leisure service providers, parents, teachers, and advocates. To obtain a copy, call: 1-800-638-3775.

Fun for Everyone: A Guide to Adapted Leisure Activities for Children With Disabilities
AbleNet, Inc., Minneapolis, MN 1990
($20.00) A handy guide to age-appropriate and functional activity selection for school-age children. Shows ways to adapt battery-operated toys with simple technology. Examples, stories, ideas, and resource lists are included. To obtain a copy, call: 1-800-322-0956.

We wish to dedicate this booklet to the many parents, students with and without disabilities, leisure providers, and other "key players" who contributed to its development by sharing their vision and perspectives on inclusive recreation.

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